

A Recall Of the Salient Features Of The Yoruba Culture Before 1500 A.D

By:

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Abstract

The beauty of any cultural heritage is incontrovertible hidden in the human aboriginal virtues. The perpetual evolution of the modern world imposes “preventive cobwebs” in the heart of cultural development. The emanated source of Yoruba culture has been, for years, neglected and hence lost in obscurity. The rigorous herculean to relocate its peculiarity as perpetually resulted in the erroneous presentation of her correct image. This heart-breading issue, accompanied by other recalling and rejuvenating reviews of Yoruba culture as occasioned this paper ardent call. While rhetorical and analytical approach will be strictly adopted, the paper shall handle this discourse from the Yoruba origin till about 1500 A.D vis-à-vis culture conceptual exploration to revive the dead cultural way of thinking and self addressing.

Key Words: Cultural Heritage, Evolution, Rhetorical and Analytical Approach.

Introduction

In its rawness, culture (Latin: cultura, lit. “Cultivation”) is use to refer to a society or group in which many (or all people) live and think in the same ways.¹ The word “culture” is most commonly used in three basic senses: Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture; An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning and the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, or group. However, Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, “Primitive Culture”, published in 1871, define culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”²

It is unavoidable to realize that the ability of people to have culture comes in large part from their physical features: having big, complex brains; an upright posture; free hands that can grasp and manipulate small objects; and a vocal tract that can produce and articulate a wide range of sounds. Without exemption, culture is basically characterized based on symbols that is, an abstract ways of referring to and understanding ideas, objects, feelings, or behaviors or/and the ability to communicate with symbols using language. Pertinently, culture is shared. This is viewed from the way people in the same society share common behaviors and ways of thinking through culture. Culture is also capable of been learned, that is, culture is socially inherited through other people in a society and of course, culture is adaptive. That is to say that, the people use culture to flexibly and quickly adjust to changes in their environment.³

Capable of subject elucidation is the categories of culture which of course will be unmask in the Yoruba Aboriginal Culture during this discourse, these includes: Material culture which is the products of human manufacture, example is technology; Social culture which pertains to people's forms of social organization that is, how the people interact and organize themselves in groups; Ideological culture which relates to what people think, value, believe, and hold as ideals and of course, the arts which include such activities and areas of interest as music, sculpture, painting, pottery, theater, cooking, writing, and fashion. Anthropologists often study how these categories of culture differ across different types of societies that vary in scale (size and complexity).⁴

Background Study

Yoruba country, as addressed by Reverend Samuel Johnson in *"History of the Yorubas from the earliest to the beginning of the British Protectorate"* lies to the immediate West of the River Niger (below the confluence) and South of the Quorra {i.e., the Western branch of the same River above the confluence}, having Dahomey on the West, and the Bight of Benin to the South. It is roughly speaking between latitude 6° and 9° North, and longitude 2° 30' and 6° 30' East. The country was probably first known to Europe from the North, through the explorers of Northern and Central Africa, for in old records the Hausa and Fulani names are used for the country and its capital ; thus we see in Webster's Gazetteer " Yarriba," West Africa, East of Dahomey, area 70,000 sq. miles, population two millions, capital Katunga. These are the Hausa terms for Yoruba and for Oyo.⁵ The Yorùbá constitute, perhaps, the most studied African ethnolinguistic group. This is hardly surprising for a people known for a long history and a vibrant, enduring culture that, in pre-colonial times, evolved complex economic, political, and social institutions and built powerful centralized states.⁶

The Yorubas are said to have sprung from Lamurudu one of the kings of Mecca whose offspring were Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yorubas, the Kings of Gogobiri and of the Kukawa, two tribes in the Hausa country. It is worthy of remark that these two nations, notwithstanding the lapse of time since their separation and in spite of the distance from each other of their respective localities, still have the same distinctive tribal marks on their faces, and Yoruba travellers are free amongst them and vice versa each recognizing each other as of one blood. At what period of time Lamurudu reigned is unknown but from the accounts given of the revolution among his descendants and their dispersion, it appears to have been a considerable time after Mahomet.

The historical consciousness of the Yoruba started at ile ife, a town situated at the south-west of Nigeria.⁷ though Adebajji A.S posited that:

"That the Yorubas came originally from the East there cannot be the slightest doubt, as their habits, manners and customs, etc., all go to prove. With them the East is Mecca and Mecca is the East. Having strong affinities with the East, and Mecca in the East looming so largely in their imagination, everything that comes from the East, with them, comes from Mecca, and hence it is natural to represent themselves as having hailed originally from that city".⁸

In any case, the Yoruba found themselves in geographical location such as Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, Lagos (Eko), Kwara and other place ab extra and ab intra the country, which in our period, Ile-ife was refer to as the cultural/traditional home and Old Oyo empire as their political home. With unique and spectacular cultural heritage, the people as for long been addressed as the most cultural oriented people in ancient and in fact, in modern days.

These noticeable features around 1500 A.D are obvious as Akogun Tola Adeniyi asserted *“some what are the traditions that sharpened the Yoruba identity? What are the values that threw up their culture? Or in another way, what cultures have combined to shape up their values? We may spend a whole day to itemize the salient structures that constitute the Yoruba plethora of cultures and traditions. But the most prominent are the Yoruba political structure, the social fabric, the sociology of the race, especially in areas relating to love, marriage, inheritance, in-laws, respect for elders, and unmatched love for neighbours and every body a Yoruba person has contact with. The communalism in labour matters, and the Esusu, a Yoruba co-operative banking system are some of the cultural tenets that define the Yorubas”*.⁹

The Concept Of Omoluwabi Cultural Theory

The Yoruba cultural identity is encapsulated in the age long concept of OMOLUWABI. Omoluwabi, which will be a major reference while fine-tuning their salient culture, is quintessential. Omoluwabi is not lazy. Omoluwabi is good looking and modesty in traditional and cultural dress. Omoluwabi cherishes industry and he gets respected through hardwork and the accomplishments hardwork brings his way. Omoluwabi is ever truthful. An Omoluwabi loves his culture and can defend it anywhere. An Omoluwabi will NEVER tell lies under any circumstance. Omoluwabi is bold and courageous. And when he is on the battlefield, he will defend his rights with his blood if need be. But he is not foolhardy. “Moja-mosa ni Akin ogun”! An Omoluwabi will not steal, because he hates anything that will bring shame to his family or to himself.¹⁰

This is to assert that, the Yoruba culture is traceable to the Omoluwabi Theory, which in epitome state that “ Omoluwabi will be responsible, no matter the cost” this assertion is undoubtedly hidden in the respect they have for their culture. These cultures will make-up the next consecutive iters of this lacuna.

Dress

Interestingly, The Yorubas in the beauty of their culture, clothe themselves in loose flowing robes like the people of the East, whence indeed they trace their origin. They wear gowns, vests, and a very free and ample kind of trousers Called “Sokoto”. In lieu of the gown sometimes a sheet of cloth three yards by two is thrown around the body for a covering, passing under the right arm-pit, and overlapping over the left shoulder. In ancient times(before 1500 A.D) and even now. The gowns were made very plain and were, of purely native manufacture. They were without embroidery on the breast and around the neck as at present; only kings and chiefs wore gowns made of superior stuffs richly embroidered. The covering for the common people is called Elege. The weavers have a standard of breadths for all home-made cloths. Men's coverings are made of 14 breadths, and

women's of 10, of about 5 inches each. Examples of such are: kukumg, SSmayan, Ewii, Dandogo, Suliya, Agbada and Girike.etc.¹¹ Dismally, our generation only busy chasing the shadow of the European style of dressing and in consequence, neglect these priceless cultural virtue that represent the pride of the people.

Marriage

It is beautiful to recollect that, In ancient times, the Yorubas were mostly monogamic; not from any enlightened views on the subject however, but rather from necessity; for, although polygamy was not actually forbidden, yet only rich folk could avail themselves of indulgence in that condition of life.

Besides, in a community mainly pastoral and agricultural, where all were peaceful, and no one engaged in any occupation perilous to the lives of its male population e.g. warfare, sea- faring, deep mining, etc., where wants were few, and those easily satisfied, the young men married as soon as they were of an age to support a family, and therefore a superfluous female population was hardly ever known.

It is not Superfluous to note that, the marriage laws and customs have undergone changes brought about by intercourse with other peoples, but the chief features in them are still preserved. Where all things are equal and normal, there are three stages to be observed, viz: An early intimation; a Formal Betrothal and the Marriage. To elucidate this three ambiguous terms: An early intimation is generally the duty of the female members of the family to look out for a wife for their male relative; girls are generally marked out from childhood as intended for a particular young man, with or without her knowledge; this is the first stage in the process. The second which is The Betrothal, or called the "Isihun " or formed consent, posited that the girl will marry without the consent of her parents; and it is rare for a girl to refuse the choice of her parents. The family oracles are invariably consulted before the final decision is arrived at. The ceremony of betrothal is a very important one ; it is generally performed in the night, when all the most important members of the family on both sides will be at leisure to be present, as well as their intimate friends. The third which is Marriage, (Igbeyawo), may be solemnized at any time of the year, except during the fasts, but the most usual time is after the season of harvest, and following the Egugun festival. The bride is conducted to her new home always in the night, attired in her best with a thin white cloth for a veil, and attended by her companions all well clothed, with drums, and singing and dancing.

Succulently, the following peculiarities mark Yoruba wedded life as a means to protect the dignity of their culture: In the First place, women are never really married twice; they may be inherited as widows, or taken for a wife outside the late husband's family, but the marriage ceremony is never gone over again under any circumstances. Another fact is that once the people get married, they are attached for ever to the house and family of their deceased husbands; hence it is more usual for widows to choose another husband from the same family. In the same vein, No woman is without a husband, except in extreme old age, but every woman must in any case have a male protector who is responsible for her. Also worthy of note is that divorce is very rare; so rare as to be practically considered as non-existing. It is by no means easily obtained especially when there are children of the union. The causes that may lead to a divorce are: Adultery with the husband's

blood relation, kleptomania, repeated insolvency, especially such as may bring trouble to the house. A woman may apply for a divorce for extreme cruelty, which can be testified to, and ill-usage. But these causes notwithstanding a divorce is never granted by the rulers of the town until all possible means of reclamation have been exhausted. Finally noted, a woman divorced from her husband can never be married, or taken up legally by another man; hence the saying "A ki isu opo alkye" (no one can inherit the relict of a living man). Under purely Native Government the above rules still hold good.¹² Unfortunately, this beautiful heritage had no place to hide in our culture today since the exploration of the Europeans (western education) which of course, had made us the enemy of our own culture and replace it with Church wedding.

Religion

In serpiginous of this discourse, the Yoruba religion is also another undeniable cultural element to pin-point. The Yoruba believe in one Supreme Being variously called Olorun ["the Owner of Heaven" or the Lord who dwells in Heaven], Odumare or Olodumare [" the Owner of destinies"], Oluwa, ["the Owner of Us"] and who is believed to dwell in heaven. Olorun is the Creator of the Universe and all that dwell therein. All prayers are directed at Him or Her. The Yoruba Olorun is not gendered. Olodumare, the Adiitu, the Inscrutable; limitless, timeless, ubiquitous, and genderless. They believed the existence of gods like: Orisa Nla,[the great Divinity] or Obatala [the "Immaculate King", Orunmila, otherwise known as Agbonniregun, who is the god of Divination, Esu Elegbara, He is the divine Messenger who delivers sacrifices prescribed by the Ifa priest to other gods, Ogun, the god of iron, metals and war and of course, Sango, the god of thunder and lightning.¹³ In the beauty of their culture, they are loyal to this gods and keep their obedience to them. This guide the people cultural obedient before the arrival of the Europeans who denigrated this traditional and cultural inclined gods and introduce a Universal God through Jesus Christ, Who was claimed to be the savior of the world and in return, the people worship God through Jesus Christ in Churches headed by the Priests.

Facial Marks.

It is momentous to aver that the facial marks are for the purpose of distinguishing the various Yoruba families. Of these, only those of the principal ones can be indicated. They are designated: Abaja, Keke, Gombo, Ture, Pele, Mande and Jamgbadi. The Oyo marks are: The Abaja, Keke or Gombo, Ture. The Abaja are sets of three or four parallel and horizontal lines on each cheek; they may be single or double, each line being from half-an-inch to one inch long. Lines in sets of three: ~ ~ or ~, how beautiful!

The double sets are those of the Royal Family of Oyo, the single that of the older line is Basoruns. These marks distinguish some noble families of Oyo.

Vivaciously, Variations of these marks are made by adding three perpendicular lines to them as a family distinction thus: iU _ or LU. The latter of these is common amongst the Ibolos and Epos. The Keke or Gombo consists of four or five perpendicular and horizontal lines placed angularly on

each cheek; they occupy the whole space between the auricle and the cheek bone; three small perpendiculars are also placed on the horizontal lines on both cheeks.

Besides the above, broad ribbon marks termed “Eyo” drawn along the whole length of the arms and legs are distinctive of the Royal Family of Oyo. For whereas homeborn slaves and others closely related to Royalty may have the facial marks distinctive of the house to which they belong, the Eyo marks are reserved strictly for those actually of Royal blood. A variation of this is sometimes made by adding on the left cheek the Ibamu i.e. a line running aslant from the bridge of the nose to the horizontal lines. This also is for the purpose of distinguishing a family. When the lines are rather bold, the mark is termed Keke, when fine and faint it is termed Gombo. The Keke or Gombo is a common mark of all Oyos and of the Egbado tribe.

The Ture consists of four perpendicular lines somewhat like the Gombo, but longer, with the three small perpendiculars but without the horizontals. While the Pele are three short perpendicular lines over the cheek bones, each about an inch long. They are not distinctive of any particular family, but are used generally by some men who disapprove of tribal distinctions, usually Moslems, but are loth to remain plain-faced, e.g. The Mande and Jamgbadi are no longer in use ; the latter is said to be distinctive of aliens naturalized amongst Yorubas.¹⁴ The aforementioned are the principal facial marks among others. This peculiar facial marks are underrated today as they sees whoever has such mark as uncivilized and in consequence, opening a dark chapter in the Yoruba cherishable cultures.

Social Polity

It is juicy to come to the understanding that the ancient Yorubas were very simple in their manners, their tastes, and habits. Their houses all on the ground floor are built in compounds called Agbole (lit. a flock of houses), that is to say in the form of a hollow square, horse shoe or a circle, enclosing a large central area, with one principal gateway the house being divided into compartments to hold several families, all more or less related or united by ties of kinship, or friendship. One piazza runs right round the whole, and is used for all ordinary purposes by day, and for the reception of visitors. The central area is used in common by all the inmates for general purposes; usually horses, sheep and goats are found tethered in it. This set-up make ease their communication, build friendship spirit among the people and their culturally designed settlement were secured.

Diet

It is juicy to know that the diet of the common Yoruba people is plain but substantial in the preservation of their cultural heritage. The morning meal is a kind of gruel made from corn flour (maize or guinea corn) and taken between 7 and 8 a.m. with Akara an oily cake made of beans, ground and fried. There are no fixed hours for meals. After midday, dinner is served, each family consulting its own convenience as to the precise time of eating. Supper is taken in the evening generally between 7 and 9 p.m. In ancient times pounded yam is served out in a large bowl or

earthenware vessel, and both the father and his children and grandchildren sit around it to partake of the food. Each one dips his hand into the dish and takes a morsel in strict order of seniority.

The youngest present acts the part of a servant and waits on his seniors; and whether the food be sufficient or not care was usually taken to leave some portion for him. The staple articles of diet are yam and yam flour, corn and corn flour, beans of various kinds, cassava, sweet potatoes, etc. Only the well-to-do can afford to indulge in flesh diet daily, the poorer people are mostly vegetarians, except when animals are slaughtered for sacrifice they seldom partake of meat; game, however, is plentiful.

Dwellers on the coast have a plentiful supply of fish. Of fruits the principal are: The shea fruit in the plain, the "Oro" (*Irvingia Barteri* Hook) in forest lands. The Ori or black plum (*Verbenaceae cuneata*), locust, bananas, plantains, pawpaws, oranges, lime (citron), pine-apples, the well-known kola nut, and the bitter kola (*Garcinia kola*-Heckel), ground nuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), etc. Their drink consists of palm wine, bamboo wine, and beer made from the guinea corn or from maize.¹⁵ well, may I posit that this few of this delicious and culturally inclined meals are found in a common Yoruba home, especially in special occasions. Instead they are replaced by the imported (chemically preserved foods) from neighbor country.

Trades and Professions

Pertinent to the aforementioned points, their trade and profession also reveal some element of culture, the principal occupations of men are: Agriculture, commerce, weaving, iron-smelting, smiting, tanning and leather working, carving on wood and on calabashes, music, medicine, barbing, and other minor employments. Agriculture is the most general occupation of the bulk of the people. It is carried on with simple and primitive instruments, viz. a hoe and a cutlass, and nothing more, both of home manufacture. Ploughing is unknown, and it is very doubtful indeed whether a plough would be of much service to them under present conditions as at the period under consideration; experiments with that instrument by those who understand the use of it have not proved successful. The principal articles of food and of commerce are: Corn (guinea corn in the north and maize in the south), beans of several varieties, ground nuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), yams of various species, sweet potatoes, koko (*Colocasia antiquorum*), pepper, piper, calabashes and other kinds of gourds, coffee, cocoa, kola nuts, vegetables of all sorts for home consumption, cotton for weaving, etc. there are trades operations carried out by Women, specific jobs are reserved for old women who have little strength in causal works.¹⁶

Related to the above is the use of metallic currency and their aboriginal "trade by barter system" for transaction, this evolved out of their culture, the metallic currency was unknown previously before the arrival of European traders, and even as lately as 1897 in places far off from the coast coins were regarded more or less as a curiosity. Silver was better appreciated than gold or copper, because it can be converted to ornaments. Silversmiths abound in the country whilst there were no goldsmiths. Shells then stood for money and are thus calculated: 40 cowries = 1 string, 50 strings = 1 head, 10 heads = 1 bag. The value of a cowry was never fixed. But, since the British occupation of Lagos the principal port of the Yoruba country, and English coins began to circulate in

the country, the rate of exchange became practically fixed at 6d for a " head " (the usual standard of calculation) i.e. 2,000 cowries ; hence 3d. = 1,000 cowries. But coppers being considered inferior in value; one penny is taken at 300 cowries each; 3d. in coppers then would be 900 cowries.¹⁷ Of course, modernization as made the people upgraded to the new world paper money, electronic money and related newly developed transaction” mudos operandi”.

Learning

Credible enough to be appreciated is the Yoruba cultural way of learning. The Yorubas have no knowledge of letters (English Education), their learning consists chiefly in oral traditions. The historians are the King's cymbalists and ballad singers, the chief who is called the Ologbo or Arokin. They may be compared to the rhapsodists of the Homeric age, as they perform almost precisely similar functions. They chant to the King the story of the nation, and history of former reigns, for his information and instruction. They are kept in the royal service and are well supported. The office is hereditary. Like many other heathen nations the Yorubas have their tradition about the creation and the deluge. It is their belief that at the creation men fed on wood and water, that they had a long projecting mouth; that the bat was originally a creature in human form, and was a black-smith by trade, and that with his instrument he reduced men's mouths to their present shape, for which cause he was condemned to lose the human form and to assume that of a beast, and to use one and the same mouth for receiving food as well as for evacuation. The allegation that water was the original food of man is supported by the fact that it is the first thing taken by a new-born babe, as well as the last thing taken at a man's dying moments.¹⁸ This indeed is proud worthy.

The Iwofa System (The Yoruba Cultural way of Banking)

It is tantalizing to know that the term Iwofa has no equivalent in English (it can only be cultured thus). It denotes one who serves another periodically in lieu of the interest on money lent. In short, it is one in service for interest. It has been mistranslated a "pawn" by those who fancied they saw a resemblance to it in that system, and are trying to identify everything native with those that are foreign, and consequently, as in other similar cases, much mischief has been done thereby.

The Iwofa system is a contract entered into in the presence of witnesses called Onigbgwo i.e. sponsors, the money-lender is termed Oluwa i.e. master, and the worker Iwofa, i.e. a service man. It is a legal transaction recognized and protected by the laws of the country. Whatsoever the amount of money lent, it is the law that the service rendered goes for the interest, and only the principal is paid back whenever payment is made whether after a few days or after many years. An Iwofa may be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, and the laws for each differ accordingly. A man Iwofa lives in his own house and plies his own trade, but he is required to clean a piece of land equal to 100 yam heaps or an equivalent in his master's farm once a week, the Yoruba week consisting of five days. The people being mainly agricultural, farm-cleaning is the work of their daily life, and is the recognized ordinary system of labour.¹⁹ This display the richness of Yoruba cultural heritage.

Wealthy Personages

Also worthy of note is their designed means of recognizing wealthy personages. there were certain historical personages in Yoruba who were noted for their great wealth, examples include: Amoloku of Oro, Gedegbe of Ofa, Lapemo of Ijomu near, Onibiy6 of Guguru, Minimi of Erubu. There is also a sixth spoken of who resided at Gbudu. There was also a lady known as the Olowo of Ijebu.²⁰ Festivals, Wars, Funerals, Detraining for Debts, Name and Naming, among others, are also important features that displays the Yoruba culture by the fifteen century.

Conclusion

Without mincing words, this paper has successfully address the subject and object of discussion through enormous herculean. It has scrutinized the notable and germane features of Yoruba culture before 1500 A.D. Taking all the traditions together therefore, a possible interpretation is that at Ile-Ife, long before the period of Oduduwa, am monarchical form of government had developed with perhaps a high degree of cultural attainment.²¹ Following the different denigrating and castigating approach, the paper will conclude thus:

Opine at first that the Yoruba culture which as been from time unmentioned seen as primitive and awarded little or no respect especially some aspect of the culture like: Facial Marks, cultural dressing, Meals, festival celebration, Marriages as earlier addressed and the likes, should be reconsidered and retraced to their aboriginal source of evolution and in turn, began to invoke it into the younger generation and tutor the older generation.

Stemming from the forgoing, the Yoruba culture had been corrupted through introduction of modernization technics, this modern style has missed with the culture and became tedious to disengulf, hence, Yoruba leaders are therefore advice to screen the culture through a re-visitation to the original source to separate the “wheat from the thorns” and established an unadulterated and undiluted cultural Yoruba standard for their generation.

To this end, foreign influences are one of the factors that contributed to the underdevelopment of the Yoruba culture. They, through their isolated interest as for times past venturing into the Yoruba cultural relies, most of which are bought and store in their archive. Unfortunately, the Yoruba now pay huge amount of money to revisit and recall their cultural and traditional relies. This need to be checked ardently and the recovery of this relies will be my personal recommendation.

On the final note, revival and rejuvenating of the Yoruba culture will be unarguably advisable. Cultural festival should be more propagated, cultural Seminars should be organized for people, Cultural arts should be practiced in schools, Government should invest in Tourisms, Zoological Gardens, and other related cultural reminder elements. This I believed would go a longer wasy in reviving the noble culture of the Yorubas.

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